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ABSTRACT

The emotional and social effects of divorce on a child's personality and development are discussed. The characteristic psychological reactions of the child are described in terms of guilt, rejection failure, resentment, anxiety, self concept, self pity, and hostility. Suggestions are given for the parent and teacher to help children adjust to the divorce situation in a sound and healthy way. The necessity for adult preparation and emotional support of the child is emphasized. Guidelines that are important in explaining divorce to the child are outlined, along with several possible responses a child may feel when false explanations of parent absence are given. Individual case studies illustrate how children can be helped and counseled during and following divorce situations. The manner in which the child is prepared, counseled, and worked with during the divorce situation is a determining factor in a child's adjustment. (CS)

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# DIVORCE: SOME EFFECTS ON AND TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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DIVORCE: SOME EFFECTS ON AND TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Severence of the marital tie by divorce, especially where there are children creates serious emotional, financial, and social problems of long duration and great intensity [Rice, 1970, p. 457].

Divorce!!-----Broken homes!!!-----What does it all mean to parents and young children? What are some techniques that can be employed by teachers and other adults in counseling and working with children from broken homes? These are two of many such questions that have great significance when examined in the context of sex role identification of girls and boys and the emotional effects of divorce on both parents and children.

There have been several studies on the effects of parent absence on the development of the child's sex role in divorce situations. "Absence . . . from the home is usually associated with poor sex role identification of the children in the home [Ryker, 1971, p. 200]." The child's parents are his models for developing knowledge of how people should act. With one parent absent, the child will only learn roles from the remaining parent. At every developmental phase of growth, the child needs both parents as objects of love, security, or identification, or even as figures against whom to rebel safely. As an indication of the importance of both parents being present in the home, McGord (1962) states that delinquent activity can be attributed to paternal characteristics of intense conflict, rejection, and deviance. Such characteristics occur more commonly in divorce situations. The common reaction to father absence

by male children was identification with the female sex role and aggresiveness, especially for children between the ages of six and ten (McGord, 1962; Ryker, 1971). The research results of father absence upon female children is summarized by Heatherington (1973) who studied reactions of 72 adolescent girls to interviews with adult males and adult females. Heatherington suggested that girls without fathers did not interact "appropriately" in the interview with the adult males. Girls whose fathers were absent due to death tended to be withdrawn, while girls whose fathers were absent due to divorce were sexually forward. ". . . It is at least in part through experiences with her father that the daughter acquires the social skills and confidence necessary to interact appropriately with members of the opposite sex [1973, p. 49]." The earlier the separation from the father, the greater the effect on the daughter's behavior. Since the mother exhibited female sex roles, there was no deviance in the girls acquisition of sex roles. Ryker (1971), in a study of 51 black families, found that the females identify greatly with their mother's sex role to the extent that they take on the majority of domestic responsibilities. Other than sex role identification there are other effects of divorce on the emotional and social growth of young children.

Effects of Divorce on Parents and Young Children

Divorce and situations leading to divorce are grim experiences effecting the personality and development of both the young child and his parents. With divorce comes the belief that the parents and children

have failed. For the parents, failure is often expressed to the child in the reproving use of the phrase, "you are just like your mother (father)." Parents are also likely to feel grief, shock, rejection, defeat, resentment, frustration, self-pity, guilt, and rage (Despert, 1953). At times, parents resent the absent parent for not sharing responsibility for problems relating to the child. In addition, parents may feel guilt in wanting to share responsibility for the child. Resentment and guilt are often expressed in anger directed at the child. However, this anger directed at the child is most often indirectly meant for the absent parent and the failure of the parent in helping to raise the child.

In addition to anger, the remaining parent is also faced with a financial burden. The parent often faces the prospect of having to move and start a career. They must take care of the child, the home, and a job as well. The emotional, social, and financial pressures felt by the remaining parent must be properly handled in order to help the child adjust to divorce. The parent must be prepared to express feelings in a way that will not disturb the child or force the child to view the absent parent in a negative way. The majority of the burden of easing the child's anxiety lies with the parent.

For the child in a divorce situation, he or she intuitively knows that something is happening to the family unit but is unable to express it. "Despite repeated attempts at reassurance on the part of the parent who is to remain with him, he is rarely convinced that the parent alone has the power to supply all his needs . . . [Gardner, 1956, p. 59]."

The young child, like the parents, experiences many types of feelings in divorce situations. The young child's feeling most often reported is guilt (Cook, 1971; Despert, 1953; Freudenthal, 1959; Heatherington, 1973). The child feels guilty for not geing able to prevent his parents' break-up. "Occasionally a child will develop feelings of guilt because he believes that somehow he is responsible for the separation and divorce [Pecot, 1970, p. 295]." The child also feels guilty as, ". . . the cause of the remaining parent's deprivations and inability to enjoy fuller gratification in life [Freudenthal, 1959, p. 47]." Related to the child's sense of guilt, is a feeling of failure. The child believes that he has failed to resolve his parents' differences and bring them together. Given this feeling of failure, the child begins to doubt his personal worth and attractiveness. The child will also tend to feel rejected by a parent leaving and also harbor a fear of being abandoned.

The parent must understand the child's orientation toward guilt, failure, and self-doubt, and help the child to cope with these feelings. If these feelings are not carefully and successfully dealt with they may emerge as anger, hate, and a desire to strike out against society.

Another important effect of the divorce situation on the child is the emerging feeling that he is not being raised "normally." According to Freudenthal (1959, p. 45), ". . . The child raised in a single parent family constantly realizes that he or she is different." The child cannot help notice that "normal" children live with two parents. In the face of this perception, the child conceives of his own status as one of deprivation and personal inferiority which may result in withdrawing from the world.

Divorce brings about feelings of guilt, failure, and doubt of personal worth within the child. Since the child has little or no way of understanding the subtleties of an adult relationship, the child's immediate reaction to divorce is to view the parent who has left home as the one who abandoned him. The child is "likely to be hostile toward the parent [Despart, 1953, p. 17]." The child inherently knows something of great importance is being taken away from him and may also feel and show hostility toward the remaining parent, peers, and people with whom the child comes in contact. With a less secure self-concept the child, in turn, internalizes more of the negative feelings that result from family breakdown. Due to breakdown of self-concept and fear of further rejections, anxiety is a likely reaction to the separation. "It has long been the tradition to view anxiety as a primary outcome of . . . [parent] . . . absence [McGord, 1962, p. 361]."

In reaction to anxiety, according to Gardner (1956), the child, using several strategies to retain security may: (1) withdraw, (2) exhibit hyp e raggressiveness--hostility, (3) regress to infancy, and (4) feign illness. In each case the child is adopting a defense mechanism to protect himself from the insecurity of the divorce situation. By withdrawing or being hostile, the child cuts himself off from further rejection. Displaying this behavior, the child on one hand builds a protective shield to establish his independence. On the other hand, the child who exhibits over-dependence is establishing what he feels is a relationship where the remaining parent must remain to care for him. The child hopes through such strategies to bind the parent to his needs. "Separation and divorce

can result in a child's becoming overly dependent upon or concerned about the remaining parent [Pecot, 1970, p. 294]." In addition to over-dependence, the reactions of regression or feigning illness ultimately suggest running away from and day dreaming about situations more appealing to the child. In both cases the child refuses to face the divorce situation.

Finally, visitation rights coupled with the already existing attitudes within the child, provide a basis for strong emotional feelings associated with prescribed visits with the absent parent. The child's anxiety level increases when he leaves his remaining parent, and while visiting the absent parent, ". . . feels particularly guilty if he feels he had a better time there than he has had at home [Gardner, 1956, p. 62]." The child may also feel uncomfortable about leaving one parent to go visit another parent.

Divorce has strong effects on sex identification and on affective and social development of both the child and parent. The parent and teacher must deal with the effects so that those involved can adjust to this situation in a sound and healthy way. The problem is to recognize the child's fears and help him to work through and understand them. The child, unlike the adult, has no words to express his fears and emotions but can only ask questions and act out in ways that touch the surface of his feelings. It becomes imperative, then, that both teachers and parents examine various approaches to working with young children in divorce situations, and modify and adapt these approaches to fit specific instances.

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Preparing the Young Child for and Working with Them in Divorce Situations

Parents generally do not attempt to help the child understand a divorce until he or she shows signs of emotional upset. These signs may appear well after the divorce has taken place and the parent already is beginning to adjust to the situation. The parent or teacher who first notices signs of distress at this time is late in helping the child. ". . . Parents should look to their children not the day after the decree is granted nor even the day before, but at the moment when they begin to be aware of trouble between themselves [Despert, 1953, p. viii]." Finding parents who are in the grips of a divorce and are not selfish is unlikely and not expected. It is not that parents have been unconcerned about their children. "Their [parents] concern has been pushed aside by their intense preoccupation with their own struggle [Despert, 1953, p. viii]." The difficult position of pushing aside one's own feelings to help another is necessary for the healthy adjustment of the child.

The severity of the effects of separation on the individual child and the child's ability to successfully tolerate the stresses generated depend upon a variety of factors, among which are age, sex, maturity, number of siblings, economic status of the family, circumstances leading to the divorce, and preparation and emotional support that the child receives from the adults involved [Pecot, 1970, p. 294].

The necessity for adult preparation and emotional support of the child is fundamental. McGord (1962) found that children who were emotionally prepared did not suffer the trauma of divorce as greatly as children who

were not prepared for it. Freudenthal (1959) found that children who felt supported by their parents did not express the same harsh emotional reaction as children who felt their parents support was lacking. Despert, in reinforcing the idea of helping the child through the divorce suggests, ". . . let nothing come between you and them if you can possibly prevent it. The first aim of your campaign is to keep their confidence and strengthen their reliance on your love [1953, p. 12]." The child needs to know he is loved, wanted, and cared for, and above all, worthy of the love he is to receive.

The first step in preparing the child for an impending divorce is to tell him what is happening. There are several guidelines that are important in explaining divorce to him. They are:

1. There is trouble between parents.

   The adult does not have to explain every detail to the child, he will not understand. Mommy and Daddy are cross, they are unhappy, they have problems they cannot work out.

2. Some things are wrong, b[illegible] not everything.

   Only Mommy and Daddy are having problems. The child is still loved.

3. The child is not to blame.

   He or she has done nothing wrong. Mommy and Daddy love him just as much as ever. The problems are not his fault. He cannot make things better, however Mommy and Daddy still love him.

4. Assure the child more than once.

   Young children, like adults, do not learn the first time they

experience or are told things. Consequently, in such an emotional situation, the child must be reassured often.

5. Avoid slighting the absent parent.

   Such lapses into self-vindication will only cause resentment and hostility in the child, not only toward the absent parent, but also toward the remaining parent and other social contacts.

6. Do not evade the truth.

   If the parents are separating and Daddy or Mommy may return, tell him so. But do not tell the child fairy tales that will never come true.

7. Give the child opportunity to express his fears.

   There are aspects the child does not understand. He asks questions by expressing his fears. One understands the child by knowing what he is feeling.

8. One does not have all the answers.

   You are not sure. You need the child's help. Together you will work out some of the problems.

9. Do not make value judgments.

   The child has enough problems deciding without encountering statements that have not always been true to him.

[Despert, 1953]

The parents who are truely concerned will set aside their feelings until they can express them to someone who will understand. Above all it is of utmost importance to tell the child the truth. Gardner (1956) gives several possible responses the child may feel when false explanations are given for a parent leaving:

1. Father left because he did not love us.

   The child loses his sense of self-worth, and feels his mother was not completely worthy of love.

2. Mother could not get along with father.

   Mother is viewed as depriving, and fear of being sent away like father is inevitable.

3. Father could not support us.

   The child gets the impression that fathers or mothers may abandon their families. This response also leads the child to think his mother may abandon him.

4. Absent parent is dead.

   In time the child will learn the truth and will not trust the remaining parent.

5. No explanation as to why there is no father.

   His parents liked each other but they did not want him.

However, no matter how well the child is prepared, there is no explanation that will not have some effect on his developing self-concept.

Parents and teachers must realize that the child is going through much stress If changes have to be made, one method of making the child feel secure is to make them gradually. Allow the child to adjust little

by little in order to help him feel comfortable and secure. When visiting the child, it is important that visits be informal and fit naturally into the child's day. Elaborate planning only serves to make the child feel guilty. Lastly, an important thing to remember, "Divorce is not automatically a destructive experience [Despert, 1953, p. 2]." It is made so only by destructive adults.

In working and counseling children of divorced families, it is important to keep in mind that young children react to divorce in a multitude of ways. An understanding teacher and parent should be able to decode the signs of disturbance and help guide the child through this difficult time.

Examples of how children can be worked with and counseled during and following divorce situations are helpful in illustrating positive steps teachers and parents can take.

Bruce is an example of a child using hyperaggression or hostility to vent his feelings of anxiety. Bruce was seven years old, a bright child with an exceptionally high I.Q. He was very aware and always questioning. His parents divorced and during the time of court proceedings he was sent to his grandmother's house. Given that Bruce's mother worked long hours and was cared for by his father, Bruce displayed many conflicts with him before the divorce. After the divorce, Bruce would return home to find his father gone. In discussions with his mother, the teacher found no explanation was given to Bruce as to why his father was gone. Bruce frequently asked where his father was. Beginning to exhibit hyperaggressive behaviors in school, Bruce completely refused to cooperate with the class

activity, other children, the teacher, or other staff. The teacher's response was to allow Bruce to show hostility toward himself and the teacher learned to mildly respond to his behavior but without showing anger. After these periods, Bruce appeared to be satisfied and seemed to get along well in the class. Bruce frequently related these incidents to his mother and stated that he liked his teacher because they could have "man-to-man" talks. The teacher, realizing that Bruce was disturbed over his parent's divorce and that his hyperaggressiveness was a physical manifestation of his situation, permitted Bruce to "rebel" without taking disciplinary action. Here the teacher was giving Bruce a constructive outlet for his frustrated emotions.

In the instance of a hyperaggressive child, the teacher can allow him or her to rebel against authority without suppressive discipline or returned hostility. Essentially the rebellion serves as a constructive outlet for emotions and helps the child know that people care for him even when he is feeling "bad".

The second example of approaches to working with and counseling young children in divorce situation deals with Jane--a child who was both hostile and frequently regressed to infant-like behavior. At the time of the trial separation, Jane was seven years old. She demonstrated average classroom behaviors, although her mother appeared to be overly passive and met her every demand. Several months after her father's departure, the teacher noted a shift from average to very aggressive classroom behavior. She would flatly refuse to comply with teacher-related instructions. Jane did not argue with the teacher, she simply refused to comply. The teacher,

however, did not accept this refusal behavior, and each time it was exhibited firmly, but without animosity, suggested compliance to the request was necessary. At times, after incidences of rebellious activity and meaningful requests for compliance, Jane would make comments to the teacher similar to, "I wish you were my Daddy." At these times, the teacher would explain to Jane why the "wish" statement was impossible to fulfill and suggest that he would be at school to share ideas with her and her classmates. Again, the teacher served as a figure against which a child could safely rebel and still be understanding of the child's needs.

Mark, the third example, was nine years old. His reaction to anxiety was withdrawal. He was "late" in entering and then was retained in the first grade. Mark's parents were divorced when he was five and his father was awarded custody. Mark's mother was fighting the order in court. Mark felt different from the other children and once or twice a day expressed to the teacher that the other kids didn't like him. Mark was withdrawn, softspoken, and physically inactive. He frequently resorted to reverie as a means of escape. However, Mark's father tried to spend time with him, but aside from little or no shared time, he never practiced or taught his son active behaviors. The only behaviors exhibited were spectator activities. Mark wanted to join the other children, but he didn't know how and often expressed his feelings through statements of fear such as "I don't want to play ball, they'll laugh.", "I don't want to climb, I'll fall!", or "I can't do that it will hurt." These protestations were often accompanied with tears. The teacher enlisted the aid of the Physical Education teacher, and together they taught Mark activity behaviors such as running, jumping,

throwing and catching. They talked with Mark about personal problems, reassured him, let him express his fears in a friendly, supportive atmosphere, and helped him to feel and be "like" the other children in class. After several months of working with and counseling him, Mark began to interact freely with his classmates. He tried many physical and academic activities, rarely expressed feelings of fear, seldom cried, and his "spells" of reverie became more and more infrequent. In this instance, rather than being an adult figure to rebel against, the teacher had to become a symbol of support.

Diane, the third situation, is an example of a child who feigned illness as a reaction to the divorce situation. Diane was eight years old. Academically and physically, she was average. In the classroom and on the playground she was a follower. Her parents divorced when she was two and the only memory she related, was crying the day her father left home. Diane felt rejected, and this feeling was reflected in her interactions at school. Her major concern was to be liked, and when Diane could not find a playmate she would come crying to the teacher, complain of a stomach ache and request to go to lie down in the health office. Upon questioning, the teacher learned that Diane felt sick because she observed the children were rejecting her. In the office she exclaimed that she was sick and her mother was usually called to school to take her home. After discussions with Diane's mother, the principal, and the school psychologist, the staffing team in conjunction with the teacher settled upon a course of action. The teacher set aside time each day to work with Diane. The teacher, encouraging Diane whenever possible, tried to

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convince her of her worthiness. After many, many months and repeated meetings of the staffing team to examine results and alternatives, Diane measurably reduced her instances of crying and complaining of illness when possible rejection instances occurred.

The last example concerns Thelma, a positive instance in which the parents prepared to support the child emotionally in order to avoid feelings of and reactions to anxiety. Thelma's parents realized divorce was their only alternative. They also realized that Thelma would need help in adjusting to the divorce situation. The parents scheduled a conference with the teacher to discuss the matter. The teacher, realizing that the resolutions to the problems and concerns voiced by the parents were difficult, suggested that they all meet with a family counselor. The parents, teacher, and family counselor worked out a program to help resolve the problems and help Thelma adjust to the divorce. Both parents appeared to be supportive of one another and continually reassured Thelma of their love for her. On advice of the family counselor, the parents explained the divorce situation in terms Thelma could comprehend. The parents and teacher spent much time listening to what Thelma was saying, reassuring her, and quieting her fears and anxieties. The teacher also gave Thelma additional responsibilities and decision-making roles in the classroom reflective of her developmental level. She completed these tasks with much success. By the time the divorce was granted, Thelma appeared to be a more mature child. She also appeared to become more responsible after the divorce situation than before it surfaced.

Each of these examples are situations unique unto themselves as is every young child suffering from problems related to divorce. However, it is up to each teacher to examine the situation in light of a child's activities and what they might mean in relation to his home and school life. The teacher will seldom go wrong, however, if he or she takes the time and tries to care and understand. The child will indicate his needs if the teacher takes the time to listen instead of offering standardized discipline for deviant behaviors. The teacher can make important contributions in helping young children adjust to divorce situations by carefully working with and counseling them.

Conclusion

"It is not divorce, but the emotional situation in the home, with or without divorce, that is the determining factor in a child's adjustment. A child is very disturbed when the relationship between his parents ends [Despert, 1953, p. vii]." The child is buried in an emotional situation. If not properly guided he or she may have feelings of guilt, hostility, anxiety, rejection, failure, and doubt of self-worth. In divorce, the child is placed in a situation where over-protection or rejection results. But these reactions and interactions may be compensated by an understanding adult--an adult who cares for the healthy development of a child. If the child is prepared, counseled, and worked with during and after an impending divorce, it will not have the devistating influence on his development that is usually associated with the divorce situations.

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